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Montgomery Reproves Comcast, Verizon

By Cameron W. Barr
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Montgomery County Council members rebuked executives from Comcast and Verizon yesterday for treating customers badly as the two corporations compete to provide high-speed Internet access and other services to residents.

Comcast customers have complained in increasing numbers since spring about faulty Internet access, canceled appointments and incorrect billing -- a trend that Comcast largely blames on Verizon for cutting its lines during the installation of fiber-optic cable in many parts of Montgomery.

But council member Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County), chairman of the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee, observed that not all the Comcast complaints could be traced to its rival.

"It is very frustrating to continue to get the volume of complaints we are getting -- some of which, if they have any relation to Verizon's damages, I can't find them," she said.

The telecommunications giant also drew Praisner's wrath. She noted that contractors working for Verizon inadvertently caused a power outage at the home of council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) on July 22, after failing to notify residents that they were about to begin working in the neighborhood. Mike Hoover, a Verizon executive overseeing the fiber-optic project in Montgomery, said he was "shocked and quite disappointed" that Knapp and his neighbors were not notified of the impending work.

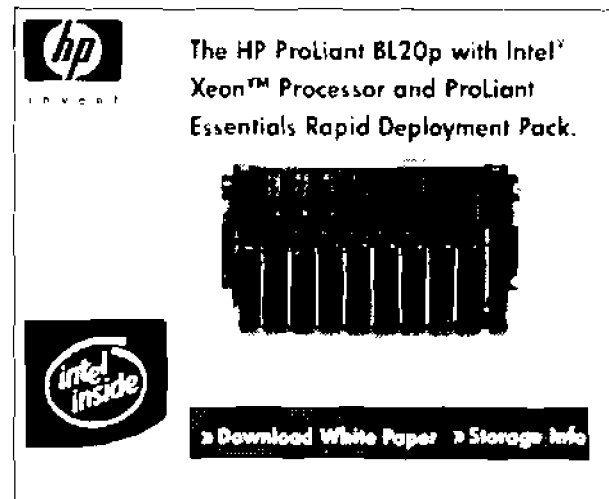
In a presentation to the committee, Jane E. Lawton, county cable communications administrator, said her office had registered more than 350 Comcast complaints as of Monday morning for July, up from 265 in the month of June. The average for the first five months of the year was about 100.

She said the company failed to provide the county with required reports for May and June that detail its customer-service performance in dealing with cable television customers. It has also failed to provide such reports for high-speed Internet customers since last year.

She also reported to council members that county lawyers have concluded that Comcast's privacy policy -- which governs how it may use customers' personal information -- is illegal under federal law.

Comcast community affairs manager Melody Khalathari told the committee that the company "is making improvements every day; we've established a good, solid record of customer service over the past year." She declined to give Praisner a date for when the company would provide the required information. When she said that Comcast and aides to County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) were still discussing the privacy policy, Lawton disputed her account.

Lawton said that Comcast had told the county that the matter was "a national policy and that they



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wouldn't change it for us."

Council members rarely allow members of the public to speak at committee work sessions, but Praisner permitted four disgruntled Comcast customers to take the floor yesterday.

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